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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the use of focus groups as a qualitative research method. The focus group is a carefully designed discussion that allows people to express their points of view and provide researchers with indicators of program impact. Participants in focus groups possess certain characteristics related to the subject under study. They are most productive when used to determine information on new proposals pr programs, assess the strength or weaknesses of a program, assess whether a program is working, and in the evaluation of program success. Planning the focus group is discussed, with emphasis on designing the focus group questions. (SLD)

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USE OF FOCUS GROUPS: AN EFFECTIVE TOOL FOR INVOLVING PEOPLE IN MEASURING QUALITY AND IMPACT

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Evaluation, including impact assessment, has become an indispensable tool of educational organizations. Therefore, evaluating the quality and impact of an educational program has become an important management and program development focus. While contemporary educational organizations exist in environments of decreasingly scarce resources, organizations must be accountable for their work, be visible in their outreach and be sensitive to public scrutiny.

Focus group interviews are a qualitative research method that consist of a carefully designed "discussion" which allows people to express their points of view in a group setting and provide researchers with indicators of program impact. Focus group interviews nurture different perceptions and points of view and are used to gather information for discovery, bench marking, evaluating, verifying perceptions, feelings, opinions and thoughts (Patton, 1990).

Participants in the focus group interview are brought together because they possess certain characteristics related to the subject under study. Group members can influence each other by responding to ideas and questions that may not otherwise be brought out in measuring the quality and impact of a current or potential program. While the purpose of focus groups is to promote self disclosure among participants in a group(s) by ascertaining their perceptions, feelings, opinions and thoughts, focus group interviews are not intended to help groups or researchers reach decisions, gain consensus or establish how many people hold a particular view like statistics (Ludwig, 2000).

Focus groups are most productive when used to determine information on new proposals or programs, determine the strengths and weaknesses of a program, assessing whether a program is working and in the evaluation or success of a program (Greenbaum, 1993). Advantages of conducting a focus group interview are the flexibility in questioning, the encouragement of dialogue and exchange of ideas, the generation of hypotheses, being relatively fast and inexpensive and producing findings in a form that most users fully understand (Miller, 2000).

While using focus groups can be an effective qualitative research method, these types of interviews are not conducive for all types of research generation. Disadvantages of focus group interviews are the technique can be misused by poorly trained researchers (called moderators), the interpretation of data is tedious and time intensive, results can be

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overgeneralized, and groups can vary considerably and be difficult to assemble (Miller, 2000).

Planning the Focus Group Process

The first step in conducting a focus group interview is to determine the purpose of the study and whom should be studied. In deciding on whom to include in the study, participants should be sought who will have the information the researcher needs (represents a variety of people). Participants should be representative of the group, but not randomly selected. Part of determining the purpose is to consider the information "users" of the gathered information – who they are, what they want and why they want the information (Krueger, 1988). The users usually include the decision makers or resource allocators related to the educational organization. For example, if the research study was on teen vehicular safety, the people to be studied might include teen drivers, parents of teen drivers, law enforcement officials, school personnel, government representatives and educators/safety leaders in the community. The users of the information could include local, state and federal legislators, driving schools, government and school officials and the community in general who desires to function in a "safe" driving environment.

Researchers conducting the focus group interview process must develop a chronological and financial plan. The chronological plan would include the time line to contacting and informing participants for each focus group, making arrangements for the location of each focus group and contacting the individuals to interpret the gathered data. For the greatest productivity, focus group sessions should be limited to one or two per day with reflection time for the moderator and the assistant moderator in between. An average of eight to ten participants with a homogeneous background, but unfamiliar with each other, is needed for each group. The participants should be representative of the group to be studied in terms of gender, race, age, income level, etc. Researchers should avoid using existing groups as some members may be intimidated to be active respondents. The average number of focus groups of participants to include in a study is four to five groups. The financial plan should include the costs for communication with participants, incentives to bring participants together (i.e., refreshments, services or products) if applicable, taping equipment and supplies, location and facilities, data analysis and other follow-up expenses as needed.

A key component in conducting successful and productive focus group interviews is identifying appropriate and informative questions to be asked of the participants. The questions should clearly define the purpose of the research. Generally, five to six questions are desired. To determine the "right" questions (those with a clear understanding and that match the purpose of the research), a review by a panel of experts or pilot and field tests with comments from participants are suggested. Questions may be derived to help the researcher learn of the participants knowledge, skills and abilities, aspirations and attitudes related to the subject. The questions should have a stimulus (topic of discussion) and a response (clues to the answer to how people are expected to answer). The sequencing of the questions must establish a pattern for asking questions, be descriptive, allow for opinions, feelings and perception to arise and stem from the

participants knowledge and/or skill. Questions starting with "why" should be limited in the selection process. In addition, questions should be open-ended and flexible, but focused to the research topic. The use of probing questions will help the participants better understand exactly what each question is asking. The more complex or emotional the issue under study, the fewer topics and specific questions can be covered. More divergent views take more time in focus group interview situations. An example of a question and probing question are:

General Question: "Has your participation *(the stimulus or topic)* in the program made a difference *(the response)* in your life?"

Probing question: "What specific skills, abilities, experience, etc. did you gain from your involvement?"

Other examples of questions:

- "What do existing clientele or potential clients think about this new program?"
- "What are the strengths and weaknesses of the program?"
- "Will you participate in similar programs because of your involvement with this program?"
- "What new and different things have you participated in or contributed to as a direct result of volunteering or participating in this program?"
- "How should we promote the new program?"
- "How well is the current program working?"
- "Would you encourage others to become involved in the program?"
- "What results have you observed from helping others?"
- "If you could change anything about your experience with this program, what would it be?"

The focus group interview process involves a tremendous amount of planning prior to the face-to-face contact with the group participants, but actually conducting the focus interviews is the key part of the process. A moderator must be identified who is familiar and comfortable with the group process and one who can keep the participants on target. The moderator must be a good listener and observer and a skilled facilitator. The moderator should be trained to not let personal feelings arise between participants or the process could be sabotaged. The moderator must be mentally alert at all times, patient as participants respond to questions (or not respond), free from distractions, well-informed about the purpose and objectives of the study and posses the ability to manage the communication process. The moderator should be a neutral third party by avoiding head nodding or other responsive body language. The moderator must also be able to use the probing questions in a productive and timely manner.

The second member of the focus group interview team is the assistant moderator. This individual provides background support by arranging the meeting room, taking notes (in the rare case the recording equipment would fail), including verbal comments and body language from participants, handling distractions (i.e., late arrivals, excess noise), de-briefing with the moderator after each session and providing feedback on the analysis report. The assistant moderator should be observant of the group participants and assist in seating participants for the interviews. Potential shy and quiet participants should be seated directly across from the moderator. Projected "experts" and loud participants

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In conducting the focus group interviews, the moderator should open with "small talk", an explanation on how the participants were selected, the expected length of the interview session and a brief explanation of the process to help make all participants more relaxed and ready to participate. Each individual should introduce themselves, by first name only, to provide credibility to the research study and make each participant more comfortable with others in the group. The moderator should explain that notes will be taken and words recorded for clarification purposes only. No connection will be made between the comments shared and the individual participant. Ground rules should be established, shared and given consensus support. Examples are:

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The most time intensive and tedious part of the focus group research is to analyze and report the results. Once the verbal data is collected and typed, at least three individuals trained in the field of study of the research read through all of the raw data as soon as possible to look for repeated responses and/or re-current trends. The noted results are then compared among the readers with the most common responses highlighted. The most common responses then become the major results of the study. Quotations are also pulled to support the responses to important questions. The results are tabulated and should be organized around introductory, transition and key questions. The final report should be shared in a form that is conducive to the understanding of the key users of the information. Final advise to researchers who move forward with a focus group research project is that the moderators should arrive early to set up the room, all equipment should be tested (and include backup equipment and tapes), the introduction should be planned and practiced, a dynamic environment should be sought and the experience should be interesting to all.

Conclusion

Focus group interviews can provide a variety of interesting and needed information for certain types of research projects. Many times focus group interviews do not stand alone as the research tool. They can be used as a follow-up to quantitative research (i.e., needs assessment) about the meaning and interpretation of previously derived data. The challenge to the coordinator of the research is to determine whether the focus group approach is appropriate to gather the information desired, how to structure the focus groups and to fully understand the process of implementation.

References

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